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Singapore Management University

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THE 21ST CENTURY WOMAN

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As gender roles change, organisations and society need to adapt to maximise professional and personal fulfillment for both women and men

Soon after being named a Partner in her mid-20s at a top strategy consulting firm, **Wong Su-Yen** found herself leading assignments in South Korea where the business culture was, and is, masculine and hierarchical. In a country famed for an after-hours drinking culture where office workers – especially men – are expected to throw back *soju* with the boss, her self-description of possessing “the trifecta of being female, Asian, and young-looking” could have resulted in her being mistaken for a junior analyst.

“My clients were male, and we went out drinking as per Korean business culture,” recalls Wong. “The thing I would do, and it’s a debatable point, is that I would pour tea - on occasion - during meals. Some of my colleagues might ask: ‘Why would you do that? You’re just reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes!’

“There is some truth to that, but there’s also a counterbalancing argument around the importance of being sensitive to cultural norms. My perspective is: If you can stand your own ground, and you have established your credibility in the business arena and the boardroom, then this tea-pouring thing does not matter one bit.

“If you don’t have the credibility in terms of substance, then it’s a different issue. My view has always been: Focus on the big picture but don’t sweat the small stuff.”

GETTING WOMEN ON (THE) BOARD

In over two decades of corporate work, the petite Singaporean has established credibility to the highest order. Having held senior positions at global consultancy firms Oliver Wyman and Mercer, and chaired parent company Marsh & McLennan's Singapore office, she is currently the Chief Executive Officer of the Human Capital Leadership Institute and sits on several Boards of Directors.

However, Wong is a minority in Singaporean, and Asian, boardrooms. In a [2015 Deloitte report](#), women were found to make up about only 10 percent of boardrooms in the region. It's a far cry from the U.S. where women represent 18.7 percent of board seats in S&P 500 companies, and a world away from Norway, which leads the world with an impressive 36.7 percent.

Norwegian legislation requiring 40 percent female board representation is a major contributing factor, echoing similar laws throughout much of Europe. Would that be one way to address the chronic female under-representation on Asian corporate boards?

"In many parts of Asia, including Singapore, companies are often closely-held," Wong tells *Perspectives @SMU*, pointing to heavy family ownership influence even amongst listed companies. "If you put in a quota, suddenly the wife or sister or distant cousin (of a major shareholder) could be named to the board, which, with the right qualifications would be perfectly fine. On the other hand, they might not necessarily be the right person from a capability or governance perspective. Quotas can have unintended consequences.

"Also, we need to look at building pipelines. Singapore has developed at a very fast pace in terms of education and access to career opportunities. But how do we keep women in the workforce so they progress into leadership levels?"

She pauses before adding: "It's one thing to say, 'Women have caught up education-wise and in the workplace,' but if we don't tackle the issue of who's taking care of matters at home, that is still an imbalance of responsibilities. When push comes to shove, if somebody has to exit the job market for a period of time, it's still likely to be the woman if gender stereotypes persist."

For that to change, Wong agrees with the former Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department, Anne-Marie Slaughter, who caused a storm with her 2012 article in *The Atlantic*, "*Why Women Still Can't Have It All*". Slaughter argued that society must accept husbands who stay home to take care of the kids as they would a wife who earns the money before true equality can exist in society at large and in boardrooms. Wong is cautiously optimistic of that coming to pass.

"I think, in time, there may be more flexible attitudes with regard to who can do what," she observes. "I do see, in the companies that I work with, changing attitudes amongst men who are coming into the workforce. These are the new generation of fathers who want to spend as much time with their kids as the mothers do. Over time it may become more acceptable for people to play different types of roles both in the workplace and at home."

THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY

Speaking to this writer at her office that overlooks the southwestern coastline of Singapore, Wong cuts an image of the 21st-century corporate leader: articulate, cosmopolitan, and possessing the ability to see the big picture. That more women like herself are climbing onto the top rungs of the corporate ladder is proof of increasing diversity, but the question remains: In a globalised world where those rising to the top often have similar world views and educational backgrounds, is there really much diversity despite differences in race, nationality, and even gender?

“I think it is critical to acknowledge and address socio-economic divisions,” Wong opines. “Socio-economic factors tend to be somewhat predictive of experience profiles and access to opportunity. This makes it so important to reach out explicitly beyond our immediate networks, lest we get trapped in our own reality.”

“The other aspect of diversity I seek out is diversity in thinking. One of the most challenging issues for boards is around bringing in different types of perspectives irrespective of race, nationality or gender. It’s about having the ability to think differently and having the courage to put forth a different point of view – in a constructive manner, of course.”

That courage to be different flows from one of three lessons Wong learnt as a woman in leadership positions: having a thick skin. The other two key lessons: Be willing to take risks a la Richard Branson – “If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes and learn how to do it later!” – and selecting the right life partner, [echoing Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg](#).

Wong’s success serves as a model of how young women starting out in their careers can climb the corporate ladder, but should they be looking for remnants of a glass ceiling? Is there even still one?

“There are some environments where that ceiling is very real,” Wong concedes. “If you have a company that’s old school and old boys clubby, then there could well be barriers that are based purely on superficial factors.”

She adds: “Those companies may ultimately find it difficult to attract and retain top talent. But if you find yourself in such a situation, that’s where having a thick skin is essential. To shatter the glass ceiling, one has to be prepared to deal with a few shards! Having said that, I would also say that not everybody aspires to the same end game. Life at the top, whether you are male or female, regardless of profession – lawyer, CEO, principal of a school – is not easy. It’s important to recognise that there might be tradeoffs, which some might be willing to make and others not.

“In many ways, organisational models have not really evolved and some women are saying, ‘I don’t want to play that game.’ You start to see a higher proportion of women entrepreneurs in the U.S. and many parts of Asia. If you’re an entrepreneur, you get to play by your own rules. You create your own environment but again, it’s definitely no bed of roses!”

DIVERSITY IN OUTLOOK

2017 marks the 30th anniversary of Wong’s freshman year at Linfield College in Oregon in the United States. While she would go on to earn her MBA that launched her career, her chosen field of study at Linfield hints at her personal interests: Music and Computer Science.

She explains: “I am a firm believer in the value of a liberal arts education, the philosophy of which goes back to the ancient Greeks who aimed to develop well-rounded individuals with knowledge across a wide range of subjects. In my case, I was afforded the freedom to design a unique, interdisciplinary double major, which appealed to my interest in both analytical and artistic pursuits. Beyond that, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in subjects that ranged from psychology to geology to philosophy.

“While I did not fully appreciate it at the time, this holistic approach to education fostered a certain degree of intellectual curiosity and personal flexibility, alongside critical thinking and communication skills. All of which has been indispensable as a business person.”

In the pre-globalisation world of the late-1980s, that education combined with exposure to people from all over the world – “From Nepal to South Africa, Costa Rica to Sweden, I was immersed with people from around 20 different countries” – to impress upon Wong the richness and power of diversity. It also informed her advice for young adults embarking on their careers.

“First of all, have a broad range of interests,” she says after a long, deliberate pause. “Be curious. It doesn’t mean you have to be good at everything, but you ought to be curious about a number of different things. Be open to new experiences. Keep learning. That builds a strong foundation for the kind of life that you will lead in the future.

“Second, a corollary to having multiple interests is developing a broad network. It’s not because networking as an activity will help you meet powerful people. Rather, it’s about building a strong web with different points. The more points of connection you have with different types of people, the stronger your support system and diversity of viewpoints you have access to. It gives you a holistic view of the world.”

“In addition, I would say it is important to build resilience. Sometimes the world isn’t fair and things don’t turn out the way you’d envisioned. Sometimes you don’t succeed even though you gave it your all and the person who came out ahead was undeserving (in your opinion). Mourn for a bit if you must, but then you need to pick up the pieces and carry on. In my experience, this applies to both men and women. I see equally resilient women and men, and on the flip side equally fragile women and men.”

And finally: “The fourth, and this is a cliché but it’s true: go out of your comfort zone. There are different ways to do that, and it isn’t restricted to work. It could be picking up a new sport, or traveling to a place that is deeply impoverished, or learning a new skill. Exercising new muscles, be they physical or mental, helps you to challenge the status quo which can lead to inertia. That pushes you to become more adventurous and it spills into other aspects of your life.”